

OPINION

Vol. XX

20th NOVEMBER 1979

No. 29

MRS. GANDHI AND THE LIE

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"I T may seem strange that a person in politics should be wholly without political ambition but I am afraid I am that sort of a freak" Mrs. Gandhi professed in 1965 when she was the Minister for Information and Broadcasting. She could hardly have believed that to be true for she had made no secret of her discomfiture as a mere Cabinet Minister in the Shastri Cabinet. One has only to read Ved Mehta's *Portrait of India* to appreciate the depth of her resentment. All that has happened since is that the ambition has acquired paranoid proportions and the ingrained propensity to lie so enveloped her entire personality that even the opposite of what she avers cannot be accepted as true. So wholly unrelated is the truth to an Indira Gandhi utterance.

On January 6, 1978 she claimed that it was Siddharth Shankar Ray who had suggested the imposition of the emergency in June 1975. "Before that she never knew that there was a word like 'emergency'" (*The Hindu*, February 7, 1978). This, from one who as Prime Minister inherited one emergency in 1966 and herself imposed another in December 1971.

"I did not like the bossism of people like him and, therefore, they turned against me in 1969." This was not said of Mr. Nijalingappa or others of Congress(O). It was said, incredibility enough, of none else but Mr. Y. B. Chavan in a speech at Sirpur on October 19 where she also accused him of acting like a "dictator". Yet Mr. Chavan was among her close Cabinet colleagues right till March 1977.

The lie that Mr. Chavan had advised her not to hold elections in 1977 was tellingly refuted by him with the simple reminder that he was in Rumania when she took the decision and hence had no opportunity to oppose or approve it.

Why did she nurse her grievances for so long? But this is of a piece with similar outbursts against unsuspecting colleagues such as that in her hour of need—June 12, 1975—none stood by her except son Sanjay. One wonders what exposures are in store in the near future for her colleagues of today.

All this is nothing as compared to the undignified somersaults she performs in making up with former enemies. The classic instance is her rapprochement with Mr. M. Karunanidhi and his DMK last September. To remove "some confusion in the minds of some of our workers" about the alliance, she told them, in Madras on September 30, that the DMK Ministry was removed by her in January 1976 since its term of five years

was over and "we did not think we had the authority to extend the term". The newsmen were given a different story that very day—the CPI and the AIADMK had "pressurised us" to appoint the Sarkaria Commission.

Never mind the obvious answer that if she could extend the life of the Lok Sabha, which was elected at the same time as the Tamil Nadu Assembly in March 1971, so could she the Assembly. The implications of what Mrs. Gandhi said are very grave: That the appointment of the Commission was not *bona fide* or justified and the DMK Ministry's dismissal was due to no fault on its part but to her belief that she had not the power to extend the Assembly's term.

On both counts Mrs. Gandhi told palpable lies. Mr. M. G. Ramachandran and his CPI allies sent their Memorandum of charges against Mr. Karunanidhi as far back as November 4, 1972. She referred it to him for his comments on November 15, 1972 which he offered by his letter of December 14, 1972. Yet it was only on February 3, 1976 that the Sarkaria Commission was appointed. The Proclamation imposing President's Rule on the State was made on January 31.

Mrs. Gandhi tells us that the takeover was only because she was unable to extend the Assembly's term but her President's Proclamation specifically referred to her Governor's report. Both were her own men who recited in detail what she wanted them to recite—"a series of acts of maladministration, corruption and misuse of power", misuse of emergency powers, and "threats of secession". It concluded in terms applicable to her own government as well—"a Ministry with this record if allowed to continue in office longer will seriously jeopardise democratic norms and democratic functioning."

Was all this also written under pressure? More to the point, were the charges genuine? The clear implication of Mrs. Gandhi's remarks is that such State papers as the President's Proclamation and the Governor's Report levelled false charges against her present ally, Mr. Karunanidhi.

The truth is known to all. Specific acts of corruption were listed in the Report. The Sarkaria Commission pronounced Mr. Karunanidhi guilty of grave acts of misconduct. But the Commission was appointed in order to justify the removal of the DMK Ministry which had refused to toe her line on the emergency.

What followed since is documented in Mr. Justice Ismail's Report. A large number of DMK prisoners were arrested on February 1, 1976 and mercilessly beaten up on the night of February 2. They included Mr. Stalin, Mr. Karunanidhi's son. The Report sets out the outrages perpetrated on the detainees. Mrs. Gandhi, one hopes, will not claim that that was also under AIADMK-CPI's "pressure".

Not that she is incapable of it. At Ahmedabad on June 18, 1978 she charged that Opposition workers deliberately "infiltrated" into the Congress during the emergency to commit "misdeeds" and malign her Government.

In Srinagar on September 23, 1977 she boasted, "We knew everything"

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only to add "Perhaps, intelligent men gave us wrong reports with the result that the Government could not size up the people's mood".

Two year later she began singing a different tune. She told a press conference at Bhubaneshwar on November 1, 1979 that she had "publicly apologised for some excesses if committed during the emergency although she did not know what these were" (*The Statesman*, November 2, 1979).

(She defended press censorship during the emergency at this press conference as she had two months earlier in Bombay.)

This is purely an illustrative sample, not an exhaustive list, of Mrs. Gandhi's exercises in mendacity. Its sheer blatancy reveals more than she suspects. First and foremost, a profound contempt for the intelligence of the people; next, a contempt for truth itself as a value; and, lastly, a desperate determination to get her way by any means. These are the certain traits of one who seeks dictatorial power not to promote a policy or ideology but power for its own sake.

There are those who excuse these traits and argue that she will, nonetheless, provide a "strong" Government. They make a cardinal mistake. A Government devoid of credibility cannot be a strong Government as strong governments are known in democracies. It can only be a repressive Government which lives by the lie and dare not face criticism. It is too much to ask the people to trust one who is a prisoner to paranoia and is unable to speak the truth even by error.

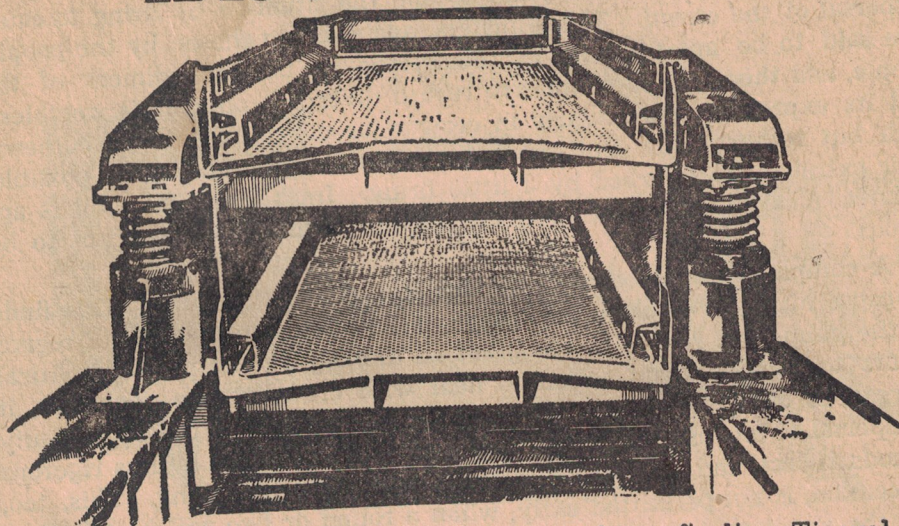
FIRING ON CROWDS

WHY, when the worst crisis of Partition is over, and conditions have obviously become more settled, should there be even more cases of the use of firearms by the forces of law and order against citizens than in any recent pre-independence five-year period? The subject undoubtedly needs detailed study. Meanwhile, it may be useful to consider a few hypotheses, not necessarily or even equally valid, yet indicating various approaches to the problem.

The present popular Governments, holders of one view urge, are expected to be infinitely more responsive to the people than any Government of the previous regime. Responsiveness means willingness to accept in time the wishes of the people, they say, and even, on occasion, to anticipate them. Because of this very expectation, when sections of the people find opposition instead of encouragement, they get infuriated and cannot be checked or reduced to normal behaviour without the extreme sanction of firing. According to this view the people say: "This is our Government. It will do what we want. And if it doesn't, we'll make it do what we want." They count on its coming round, and are prepared to use all means, including such force as they can muster, to make it come round. This leads to collisions that can only be stopped by firing.

Impatience, according to some people, is the principal reason for the firings. The impatience is often two-fold, that of the instruments as well as of their wielders, though sometimes it may be limited only to the instru-

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ments. The police force of a popular Government, such people argue, need not be as careful and scrupulous in dealing with the public in a crisis, because it can count on the effective protection of its masters, the Ministers. So, they say, faced with a crowd, it does not attempt that degree of patient expostulation that may even lead to personal danger, but having complied with the bare preliminaries, seeks to end the situation by firing to cause dispersal of the crowd. The Ministers, again, being chosen by the people, are said to be apt to think of themselves as the embodiment of the people, and therefore sometimes to regard divergent opinion as worthless, and its expressers, particularly in crowds, as not worthy to be bothered with but rather to be sent about their business as quickly as possible, their extravagances curbed by a little firing. Impatience, it is felt is apt to have a hardening effect even on men in authority known not to be callous.

A completely opposed view is also sometimes expressed. This finds the cause of many occasion for firings, not in excess of zeal or disregard for the public but rather in too great an anxiety on the part of political leaders to avoid prompt action to deal with crowds. The executive, it is urged, is often so shackled by its political chiefs that the opportunity of dispersal of crowds and restoration of normal conditions by less rigorous methods is lost, and in the end nothing will serve but firing. This, too, on occasion, is not permitted early, when a round or two will be effective, with the result that much greater damage than would have been necessary to begin with has to be inflicted. Kind-heartedness has its dangers in this matter no less than callousness. Some people hold that the country today is host to so many problems arousing deep feeling that demonstrations, often rising to a high pitch of disorder and necessitating firing, just cannot be avoided. They must be taken as one of the incidents of vigorous growth, and so long as they are not so violent as to imperil the fabric of nationhood itself, must not be regarded as anything very serious. Deplorable as occasional loss of life may be, it is better, say these advocates of hard living, than the stagnation that is the child of mental lethargy and unwillingness to insist on what is deeply felt to be a proper claim.

These opinions, and variations of these, furnish some reasons for the sad incidents that weary and shock normal citizens. But beyond all these reasons stand primary causes. These are generally grievances. Whatever the views as to the reasons, there can only be one as to the grievances. Whenever genuine, they must be redressed. Redress too must come quickly, giving as little occasion as possible for the continuance of festering wounds. In any case, there must be on the part of authority continuous awareness of the existence of the grievance, and even if action to remedy is delayed, sufficient conveying of that awareness to the people affected, so that they can continue to hope and need not succumb to the despair that often leads to wrong action. Any Government that is not aware in good time of the grievances that its people as a whole, and different sections of its people, feel they are labouring under, and if aware, does not take special pains to assuage them sufficiently

to prevent their coming to a head, cannot hope to deal successfully with this problem of frequent firing.

Grievances cannot be dealt with by fiat. Policies to deal with them have to be worked out after much thought and consideration. To say, for instance: "We have appointed a Committee of three wise men. Accept whatever they suggest, and don't argue whatever you feel," is no way of settling problems. It is only a way of exacerbating grievances, and a bitter price may have to be paid for it. — 8-7-1955.

TWO POEMS FOR TWO GIRLS

GAURI DESHPANDE

1
There has always been laughter between us
a closeness that sometimes none
could penetrate, a frightening
oneness binding each to each with bonds
surer than blood or breath
of shared sorrow, deprivation, anger and heartbreak.
More compelling than love, the laughter
after such harshness.
Only today you said: when you're ninety,
you know, I'd be pretty doddering, won't I?
Thus commanding my presence
at that distant date.

2.
It must be possible to bloom
in your being
as I did with you in my womb.
Should I not blossom with joy
to see the still, unopened petals of your eyes
fingers curled about fluffy toys
a track of dreams fading across your smile?
But in the early morning light
I droop with the weight
of coming years
since I left

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Posted at Central Packet Sorting Office, Bombay on 20-11-1979

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Edited and published by A. D. Gorwala at 40C Ridge Road, Bombay 400 006 and
printed by him at the Mouj Printing Bureau, Khatau Wadi, Bombay 400 004.

Proprietor: A. D. Gorwala.